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SUBJECT: TENSION AND POOR DEVELOPMENT TORMENT
BENISHANGUL-GUMUZ REGION

REF: ADDIS 1554

Summary

¶1. (SBU) In an early September visit to Asosa, capital of the Benishangul-Gumuz region, PolOff examined reports of recent escalations in internal conflict and observed broader political and economic issues in one of Ethiopia,s most underdeveloped regions. Many officials highlighted mounting tension between native "lowlanders" and incoming "highlanders," whom they perceive to have greater economic prosperity. Investigations into the May 2008 Oromo-Gumuz conflict (reftel) continue but its underlying causes, resource tension and border demarcation, remain unresolved. In August, the Benishangul Liberation Front (Beni), reportedly backed by Eritrea, skirmished repeatedly with the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF), heavily damaging two towns. Regarding economic development, the region braces itself for expected further cuts in its federal budget allocation while highlighting deficits in agricultural development and the regional government's management capacity. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) PolOff and a British embassy counterpart visited Asosa from August 31 to September 2. PolOff held meetings with the Regional President,s Chief of Cabinet, Senior Advisor to the Head of Regional Security and Administration Bureau, Deputy Police Commissioner, Head of Militia, Speaker and Deputy Speaker of the Regional Parliament, and representatives from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), International Rescue Committee (IRC), and VSO. PolOff also visited a regional Management Institute (MI), a regional prison, and a bridge construction project implemented through the Ambassador,s Special Self Help fund.

Increased Tensions in Benishangul

¶3. (SBU) Officials and locals repeatedly stressed that Benishangul, an historically peaceful region, is experiencing increased tension and conflict on many fronts, particularly between native "lowlanders" of the Berta, Gumuz, Shinasha, and Como ethnic groups and incoming "highlanders" from Oromiya and Amhara. Highlanders are perceived to own most businesses and encroach on native agricultural lands, and live in more affluent areas of Asosa. UNHCR highlander staff experience explicit face-to-face threats to leave and some rural highlanders are reportedly flocking to Asosa for refuge. Beni rebels and low intensity ethnic conflict also

threaten the region's stability.

Massacre Investigation Ongoing

14. (SBU) The Government of Ethiopia (GoE) continues to investigate the May 2008 Gumuz-Oromo massacres (reftel) and a mobile court has apparently begun trials of some of the 120 suspects in custody. The MI serves as an unofficial jail for many of these suspects (including the regional Vice President). The massacres drove the Benishangul parliament to pass a resolution allowing only police and militia to carry arms. The underlying causes of ethnic conflict in the region, including migrations in pursuit of scarce resources and a disputed border demarcation between Benishangul and Oromiya regions, remain unaddressed and Benishangul authorities lament that they have little leverage in negotiations with officials from neighboring Oromiya when they attempt to resolve some of these disputes through negotiation. Currently, Oromiya officials claim to have jurisdiction over land on the Sudan border lying between Benishangul and Gambella regions. Oromiya is apparently pushing the federal House of Federation hard for a demarcation referendum, which Beninshangul opposes. Benishangul officials say they desperately need a conflict resolution mechanism.

Benishangul Liberation Front (Beni)

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15. (SBU) In recent weeks, Beni rebels created instability and conflict in the Benishangul-Gumuz region. The Beni are a small, localized insurgent movement claiming to represent the agricultural, lowland Berta people who have taken up arms against the GoE for their region's relative underdevelopment and against encroaching highlanders who have migrated into the region in recent years. The Deputy Police Commissioner estimates that Beni has 300 fighters. The Militia Head and Regional President's Chief of Cabinet said the Eritrean government supports the Beni, citing captured Beni rebels who admit being trained in Eritrea. The Chief of Cabinet cited Asmara-based radio programs which highlight Beni support from a former Ethiopian Ambassador to Yemen, Yusuf (NFI), who now lives in Asmara. He also said Sudan is arming Beni. The Militia Head claimed Beni does not target lowland ethnic groups or the militia (i.e. Beni's own kind) but instead engages the ENDF. ENDF and Beni reportedly skirmished on August 12, 15, and 30, particularly in Gizen and Mengi towns, where infrastructure was apparently heavily damaged. Such attacks may increase as the rainy season wanes in November/December. The community reaction is mixed but generally tolerant; however, decreasing food resources could strain community support for Beni. There are also reports that the ENDF are disarming militias suspected of arming the rebels but the Militia Head denies this. The militia number 2,200 and suffer from poor training, little equipment, and sporadic salaries. (Note: Throughout Ethiopia, communities form militias as the local-level security forces, as the reach of the federal police does not extend to the rural community level. End note.) Specific Beni motives are opaque but sources believe they seek greater resources and development for the Berta, blaming economic stagnation on highlanders. The regional government's approach is to cast the Beni leadership in a pejorative light while promising Beni members a better future if they defect.

The Regional Parliament

16. (SBU) The regional parliament has 99 seats, including eleven held by opposition members. Ethnic representation

generally reflects the most recent census, with the Berta (46 seats) and Gumuz (36 seats) making up the majority. The Speaker and Deputy Speaker said that the April 2008 local elections were "almost transparent," and more participatory than ever, with local populations generally electing home-grown representatives. The majority Benishangul-Gumuz Democratic Unity Front (BGDUF), which consists of four parties (Boroshanasha, Gumuz Democratic Movement, Berta, and Mowocom), previously sought integration into the ruling Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Although the EPRDF denied their application, insisting that the BGDUF become stronger before integration, BGDUF is a de facto EPRDF-affiliated party which votes in step with the EPRDF in the national parliament.

Development and Capacity

¶7. (SBU) Benishangul-Gumuz is one of Ethiopia's "emerging regions," but some officials claim it is "totally neglected" by the federal government and are bracing for a further reduction of their portion of the federal budget allotment. Benishangul signed development agreements with Oromiya and Amhara regions two years ago but they remain unimplemented. The regional government's development priorities are not uncommon (education, economic development, conflict resolution) but have a strong focus on the need to modernize the region's rudimentary agricultural system for its 90 percent rural population. PolOff visited a regional MI designed to build government management capacity through training, research, and consulting while also acting as a public "knowledge center" with internet and a modest library. MI's distance from Asosa center precludes meaningful public visits, though, and trainings are sparse after donors requested a better long-term strategy before adding more funds. As mentioned above, MI now serves primarily as a jail. VSO refuses to assign any further volunteers to the MI until the jail closes. Regional government officials openly pleaded for the USG to help focus the GoE on developing the

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region and expressed an eagerness to accept USG advice on development issues.

Sherkole Refugee Camp

¶8. (SBU) UNHCR reports Sherkole camp currently hosts 4,800 refugees, mostly Southern Sudanese, Darfurians, and members of the Great Lakes community. Despite a trend of population reduction (5,000 since June 2007), repatriated refugees are now returning to the camp at a rate of roughly twenty per week as they decide their homeland offers greater economic hardship than the camp. Further population increases are likely at Sherkole if UNHCR consolidates remaining refugees from camps that are closing elsewhere. UNHCR reports no intra-camp tensions but IRC says there are isolated incidents among Darfurians, including some that are gender-based.

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